



AP Photo

Lee Harvey Oswald with Mannlicher-Carcano rifle, above, in a photo some contend was faked. Upper right, the re-created motorcade in Oliver Stone's film, 'JFK.'

The Plot's the Thing

BY FRED BRUNING

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THE ASSASSINATION of John F. Kennedy and attendant whodunit theories have done much to define the last quarter of this American century — the killing of a beloved president because his loss represented to millions the sudden snatching away of hope, and the conspiracy arguments because they revealed a powerful skepticism straining at the national psyche.

By the time the Warren Commission declared in 1964 that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in slaying Kennedy the previous year, polls showed that a third of Americans believed instead that Oswald was only a player in someone's diabolical game. The number hit 60 percent in 1966 and continued climbing. When pollsters questioned Americans following the controversial 1991 movie, "JFK," 77 percent said they had no doubt: Kennedy was the victim of a conspiracy.

It was as though Kennedy's death had inspired a new religion — an orthodoxy of disbelief. "The theories really ran around the country like wildfire," recalled Ramsey Clark, who served as U.S. attorney general from 1967-69. "It was hard to go to a college campus and not find a dozen or so young people who would come up very agitated, presenting all kinds of theories." Seeing that Clark wasn't buying, students seemed incredulous. "They would walk away shaking their heads," he said.

In his book, "Case Closed," Gerald Posner says Americans embraced alternative explanations to the Kennedy killing because the event simply seemed too painful for the work of a "misguided sociopath" like Lee Oswald. Accepting the president's death was difficult enough. Accepting the banality of his assassin was asking too much.

William Manchester, now professor of history emeritus at Wesleyan University, investigated the Kennedy killing in preparation for his 1967 book, "The Death of a President," and agreed that an "esthetic principle" is behind the American yearning for conspiracy explanations.

"If you put the murder of six million Jews in World War II on one side of the scale and, on the other side of the scale, the Nazis — the greatest band of criminals ever to seize control of a state — there is a balance: the greatest crime, the greatest criminals," Manchester said in a telephone interview. "But if you put the assassination of Kennedy on one side and that wretched waif Oswald on the other, it doesn't balance."

Through the years, many Americans have been enticed by conspiracy buffs — a huge number of theorists from Mark Lane to Oliver Stone, director of "JFK." Stone's riveting — but heavily criticized — film argued that Kennedy was targeted by an extraordinary ensemble of evildoers lurking within govern-

ment and beyond. As though attempting to keep the debate churning for another generation, Stone dedicated "JFK" to young people "in whose spirit the search for truth marches on."

Because the Warren Commission remains the centerpiece of the establishment's one-man, one-gun argument, Stone likely has no reason to fear the "march" for truth will turn back.

"What made us [Americans] so ready to believe conspiracy theories was that the Warren Commission report was woefully, woefully inadequate," says Jonathan Vankin, author of the 1991 book, "Conspiracies, Cover-ups and Crimes: Political Manipulation and Mind Control in America."

Vankin says the Warren Commission settled for the safest, most politically convenient analysis. "When you see that, you have to say something funny is going on," said the author, who believes it likely that Oswald was merely one agent in a wider plot.

Though he rejects conspiracy theories, Edwin Guthman, press secretary for Robert Kennedy when the president's brother was U.S. attorney general, says most Americans have shown nothing more than reasonable "skepticism and curiosity" about the assassination. "There hasn't been a hue and cry," said Guthman, now a journalism professor in California.

Others note that Americans are less inclined to embrace conspiracy explanations than Europeans, whose history is replete with political intrigue — some of it murderous. And yet many Americans seem eager for the outlandish — for a sighting of Elvis at the Super Bowl, or word of extraterrestrials invading the White House, or, indeed, for an explanation of Jack Kennedy's death that doesn't begin and end with Lee Harvey Oswald.

"People would rather go for the complicated rather than the simple answer," said Terence Sandbek, a California psychotherapist who has studied belief systems. He cited polls indicating that large numbers of U.S. citizens believe in astrology and the ability to communicate with the dead — evidence that "Americans in general are pretty gullible," Sandbek said.

If Americans reach for exotic answers, the habit did not begin with the Kennedy assassination. Historians note that conspiracy theories abounded after the murder of Abraham Lincoln in 1865 by John Wilkes Booth. Convinced there was a plot, authorities arrested as a co-conspirator the physician who set the fleeing killer's broken leg. Dr. Samuel Mudd was sentenced to prison for life and his predicament prompted the phrase, "Your name is Mudd."

With his fiercely researched book, Posner says he hopes to lead the nation back toward rational discourse regarding the Kennedy killing. But conspiracy theories have flourished for 30 years and appear to have a wide constituency. Will "Case Closed" end speculation on the Kennedy assassination at last? "That," sighed Posner, "may be too much to hope for." ■